

The wolf and the animal lover

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Abstract

For Aristotle a true friendship can only exist between free human beings, because true friendship is based on a shared understanding of the good. Yet today, some animal philosophers argue that friendships can exist between humans and animals, maybe not in Aristotle's sense of the word but in another way, that appreciates how animals are different from us humans, yet also share a certain commonality. Usually, these reflections on human-animal friendship concern human relations with domestic animals, notably pets. But can we befriend wild predators: those animals that by their very nature can be dangerous to us? In this paper, I examine what it might mean to befriend a wild animal, and whether it would be possible to be friends with wild wolves. I will argue that any friendly relation with wild animals will consist of a paradoxical combination of benevolent involvement and loving detachment.

1. Friendships between humans and animals

Many people today are convinced that friendships between people and animals are possible. That thought is relatively new, especially in philosophy. According to Aristotle, true friendship can only exist between two free citizens, because according to him friendship consists of a conscious form of mutual benevolence.¹ Aristotle distinguishes three kinds of friendship: friendship is based on mutual benefit, or friendship is based on the pleasure that friends derive from being in each other's company, but in friendships of the third kind, true friendship, mutual benefit and enjoyment go together with a third factor, namely a mutual admiration for the moral qualities of the other. Real friends wish each other the best because they see the other for what they are. And since only humans have the ability to recognize moral virtues in one another, for Aristotle a true friendship can only exist between free people.

Yet today, some animal philosophers argue that friendships do exist between humans and animals, maybe not in the true sense of the word but in a weaker version.² It is indeed difficult to deny

¹ Friendship with a slave is impossible, according to Aristotle, insofar as he is a slave. '*Qua slave one cannot be friends with him; but qua man one can.*' (Nicomachean Ethics, 1161 b5).

² For example, see the article 'Animal Ethics Based on Friendship' by Barbro Fröding and Martin Peterson in the first issue of the *Journal of Animal Ethics* (Fröding and Peterson 2011). Fröding and Peterson believe that recognition of the mutual benefits that pets and their owners from each other is enough to base a friendship on.

that some aspects of friendship between people and animals do exist. The mutual benefit is evident in the relationship between a dog and his master: the dog gets food and care, the owner company of the animal, and both appreciate the presence of the other for that reason. Most pet owners also enjoy the company of their pets. We all know how the company of dogs can enrich people's lives, and also that many people would be willing to sacrifice many things for their pets. Conversely, most pet owners will generally believe that their pet is also experiencing pleasure in the company of their owner. We all know the stories about dogs that languish in grief at the grave of their owner – apparently a clear case of selfless love?

Aristotle might notice that such relationships between animals and humans ultimately are based on mutual benefit and pleasure alone, and thus cannot be labeled friendship in the strict sense. Mutual goodwill and benevolence could be reduced to mutual interest and pleasure - the dog helps to fight the loneliness, the owner provides food and shelter. Something similar can be said about the apparently friendly relations that some animals appear to have among themselves.

Videos about friendships between animals of different species that share a household and thereby appear to maintain friendly relationships - dogs and horses playing together, pigs and ducks that keep each other company, dogs that care for cat litter, even cats who play peacefully with a parakeet, are highly popular on the internet.

Although in such cases there is clearly a relationship that involves more than just mutual exploitation, according to Aristotle these cases can never truly be called friendship in the full sense of the word. True friendship admittedly often starts because of mutual benefit and enjoyment of each other's company – we go to the movies with friends to enjoy a nice evening and enjoy each other's company. But as soon as these activities at a certain point initiate a true friendship, we will become genuinely interested in the wellbeing of our friend. For Aristotle, true friendship is based on a shared understanding of the good, and for that reason friendships with and between animals are out of the question.

The British philosopher Mark Rowlands (Rowlands 2011) acknowledges that in Aristotle's work there can be no question of true friendship between man and animal, because animals lack the ability necessary for true friendship. But according to Rowlands, Aristotle pays insufficient attention to the typical nature of the human-animal relationship, and fails to acknowledge the admittedly different but not for that reason inferior friendships that can exist between humans and animals. Rowlands argues that sometimes, relationships between humans and animals can also be based on more than just shared interest and pleasure. These relations can also be fueled by a deeply felt mutual benevolence and can thus be called a kind of friendship. Obviously, such friendly human-animal relationships will differ from those between humans, because humans and animals are obviously differ in many aspects, but according to Rowlands there are also similarities. According to him, even the aspect of adoration, which according to Aristotle is so essential to a full-fledged friendship, may play a role in our relationship with animals.

Author version

‘Why do we derive pleasure from the presence of companion animals? The answer is, I think, pretty clear: We admire them in various ways.’ (Rowlands 2011, p. 78.)

Our sense of admiration for animals is not founded on a common sense of the good – as is the case in friendship between human friends – rather it is based on the significant difference between humans and animals.

‘When Aristotle talks of mutual admiration, it is admiration based on a certain kind of sameness or commonality – shared moral virtue. A master and a slave have nothing in common. That is why they cannot be friends. The mutual admiration that forms the basis of Aristotle’s friendship in the real and primary sense is admiration of qualities that you could in principle have – that you should aspire to have – even if you do not, at the present time, possess them. But sometimes with animals, the admiration is grounded in qualities that you lack – and that you admire, in part, because you know you could never have them. The mutual admiration constitutive of human–animal friendships may involve an element of difference that has no echo in the Aristotelian account.’ (Idem, p.78.)

As an example of admiration as the basis for a human-animal friendship Rowlands describes his admiration for a shepherd with whom he lived for many years:

‘Perhaps I should speak only for myself. I have always admired – although often in different ways – the animals [...] who have found their way into my life. Take Hugo: I admire Hugo – a schutzhund from a long line of schutzhund champions – because of his courage. But I also admire him for the extraordinary tolerance, forbearance, kindness, and gentleness he exhibits toward my two young sons. I admire the unerringly amiable way in which he greets other dogs. I admire his extraordinary lust for life and the enormous amounts of excitement he can generate in connection with things – a walk, a thrown ball – that seem to me small things. Aristotle would, at least as I understand him, deny that these are virtues that Hugo exhibits; and that, I think, is a problem for Aristotle, not Hugo. The pleasure I derive from Hugo’s company derives from my admiration of these and other virtues; accordingly, it is this admiration that lies at the core of our friendship.’ (Idem, p. 78-79.)

What is striking however is that Rowlands mentions exactly those properties of Hugo as admirable that we also regard as virtuous in human beings: forbearance, kindness, patience. Although Rowlands claims that our adoration for animals refers to the way they differ from us, that is not apparent from

the concrete example he gives himself. He appears to admire the dog mainly due to the characteristics in which the animal resembles ourselves.³

If a difference exists at all between human-animal friendships and human friendships, then this will have to do with the asymmetry of the former. Rowlands implicitly acknowledges, for instance, that it is still very doubtful whether the admiration is mutual, when he indicates that he *hopes* his friendly admiration for the dog Hugo will be reciprocated by the animal:

‘Because I admire him, I also try to ensure he admires me in return, and so I make sure that in my dealings with him, I am always fair, consistent, calm, stable, and when necessary, strict. I am more than happy to call Hugo my friend. And the basis of this friendship is admiration that I hope is returned. This, I think, is the best way of thinking about friendships between animals who are human and animals who are not.’ (Idem, p.79.)

Is reciprocity a necessary condition to speak meaningfully of friendship? We can understand that Rowlands hopes that his feelings of friendship are reciprocated. And it is conceivable that Hugo likes it when his owner is reliable, consistent and clear – the welfare of a dog is, after all, largely dependent on a clear leader. But are we therefore also allowed to say that the animal admires his owner for those qualities, and that this admiration forms the basis for a mutual human-animal friendship?

Perhaps we should not be too strict when it comes to a friendship between man and animals. Even though the relationship is asymmetrical and there are fundamental differences in the meaning that friendship has for humans and animals, shouldn't we acknowledge that in many human-animal relations a form of reciprocity does exist, and that these can give joy and satisfaction to both parties? Dogs have been domesticated and live with together with humans for between 30 and 40 thousand years.⁴

In those thousands of years, the dog has changed from a wild and undomesticated species into a species that is all set to a form of communication with humans. It might therefore be argued that in this millennial coexistence of man and dog, a very specific form of interspecies communication has formed from which emerged a certain commonality on which also affective relationships can grow. It is because of this shared basis in a common form of communication that dog owners may hope that their feelings of friendship are answered by their dog.

³ Elsewhere, as he describes his relationship to the wolf, Rowlands gives a better example of the way our admiration for an animal may be based on those properties in which it differs from us, and therefore could be the basis for a different kind of friendship. More on that below.

⁴ Recent research (Shipman 2015) even suggests that the domestication of the dog played an important role in the evolution of modern humans. According to American anthropologists, working with dogs gave modern humans a decisive advantage over the hitherto more successful Neanderthal.

Still, there is also good reason not to think too lightly on this point and move past it. The asymmetric nature of human-animal relationships makes it difficult to speak of real friendship. The difference between humans and animals may be inspiring, but it is also essentially unbridgeable. The friendship between man and beast will mean something else for a human being than for an animal. The world of a human being is ultimately and fundamentally inaccessible to an animal - and vice versa. Human friends talk to each other about the meaning of their friendship and share their vision of the good life, animals don't. It is clear that anyone who believes that his dog understands him so well, ultimately falls victim to a nice and comforting illusion; there are many examples of people who lose sight of the fact that animals are different from humans in many important respects. If we want to remain aware of the difference between man and animal we can surely *hope* that our warm feelings for an animal will be reciprocated, and interpret the joy of a dog when the owner is returning home, or the 'good-natured' look and 'comforting' hug it gives when its owner is feeling sad as tokens of friendship, but we can never be really sure of the friendly meaning of such behavior. Undoubtedly, humans and some animals can develop all kinds of emotional ties with each other, but what they cannot do is share the *meaning* of these relationships. It is therefore problematic to speak of friendship between humans and animals, at least in the conventional sense of the word. And as the difference between man and animal becomes larger, the problem gets bigger.

But maybe we should take seriously Rowlands' suggestion that human-animal friendships are a different kind of friendship, one that is not so much based on what we have in common, but rather on the recognition and admiration for what makes us different.

2. Being friends with a wolfhound

In his book *The philosopher and the wolf* (Rowlands 2008) Mark Rowlands reports about his relationship with a wolf (or rather with a wolfhound, a hybrid between a wolf and a dog), with whom he lived together for over ten years. Rowlands points out that wolves are poorly understood in Western culture and philosophy. All things considered, most philosophical reflections about the wolf do not concern the animal, but rather the wolf as a 'shadow of man'; wolves have become a symbol of the dark side of human, something that must be overcome. Famous is Thomas Hobbes' statement 'man is wolf to man.'⁵ Instead, Rowlands describes his relationship to a real animal of flesh and blood.

A wolf differs substantially from a dog. Through its particular evolution a dog is evolved as a being that is all set for coexistence with humans, and is to a large degree able to communicate his needs to human beings and to interpret human signs. Dog and human thereby inhabit a common sense world. A dog looks at you and tries to read your intentions. For example, a dog enjoys returning a discarded cane to its owner just to please him. For a wolf it doesn't make sense to chase a stick and

⁵ Hobbes 1998, p. 3.

return it to the person who cast it. A dog understands what you mean when you point out where the ball is. But whereas a dog follows your finger to see where you are pointing, a wolf only looks at the tip of your finger. Where a dog is looking at you and is open to communication, a wolf is observing you as an outsider, and then tries to predict your behavior. A wolf is immersed in his own world, and remains an outsider to our world. That is the reason why a wolf can never be fully trained. People and wolves can learn to deal with each other, but the ease with which dogs and people communicate with each other is missing between humans and wolves. Because of this, our relationship with wolves will be substantially more asymmetrical than our relation with dogs.

Rowlands buys the wolf named Brenin early 90s as a puppy, and he soon discovers that living with a wolf is much more difficult than living with a dog. Initially all kinds of problems emerge – when Rowlands leaves the animal alone in the house, the wolf basically demolishes the furniture - but in the end he succeeds in training the animal, which makes it possible to live together. He has a relationship with the animal that lasts for years; they become inseparable. Rowlands and the wolf travel around the world together, and when Rowlands lectures at the University, the wolf is sleeping in a corner of the classroom.

Rowlands compares the training process of Brenin with the way you can train a dog. A dog is essentially focused on human communication, and one can use this fact when training a dog. A dog is prepared to do things to make his owner happy; a wolf on the other hand only does what makes sense to itself. The only way to train a wolf, as Rowlands puts it, is to ensure that the desired behavior of the animal somehow appears to it as necessary and inevitable. At its core a wolf remains an independent animal.

‘Fundamentally, Brenin was not my property; and he was certainly not my pet. He was my brother. Sometimes, and in some respects, he was my younger brother. At those times, and in those respects, I was his guardian, protecting him from a world that he did not understand and that did not trust him.’ (Rowlands 2008, p. 44.)

In Rowlands’ descriptions, Brenin often appears as an independent being and a stranger, an inhabitant of another world. Rowlands is fascinated by precisely this strangeness and autonomy of Brenin, and admires it:

‘On our runs together, I realized something both humbling and profound: I was in the presence of a creature that was, in most important respects, unquestionably, demonstrably, irredeemably and categorically superior to me. This was a watershed moment in my life [...] I can’t ever remember feeling this way in the presence of a human being. That’s not me at all. But now I realized that I wanted to be less like me and more like Brenin. [...] I think, if you want to understand the soul of the wolf – the essence of the wolf, what the wolf is about – then you should look at the way the wolf moves. And the crabbed and graceless bustling of the ape, I came to realize with sadness and regret, is an expression of the crabbed and graceless soul that lies beneath.’ (Ibid, p. 85-86.)

Author version

Rowlands' admiration for the wolf is primarily triggered by Brenin's independence and fascinating strangeness of the animal. The wolf is mysterious and strange. Several times, Rowlands calls the animal a graceful ghost apparition. From Rowlands' descriptions Brenin emerges as an animal that inhabits the world in a radically different way than we do – and much more so than dogs.

Firstly, the wolf has a strength, grace and aloofness that people do not have; the contrast leads Rowlands to become aware of his own limitations as a clumsy ape. But conversely Brenin is incapable of behavior that according to Rowlands is typical for ape-like, political animals like us: the ability to tell stories, to please, to mislead and deceive. In the introduction to his book Rowlands writes:

‘It took a long time, but at last I understand why I loved Brenin so much, and miss him so painfully now he has gone. He taught me something that my extended formal education could not: that in some ancient part of my soul there still lived a wolf. Sometimes it is necessary to let the wolf in us speak; to silence the incessant chattering of the ape.’ (Ibid, p. 8.)

Rowlands claims that admiration for the otherness of the animal could form the basis for a friendship. But what stands out in his description is primarily how the difference between humans and animals leads to a new perspective on ourselves: the core of Rowlands' confrontation with the grace of the wolf is a humbling experience, that leads up to self-reflection.

But is Rowlands not simply projecting his own human weaknesses onto Brenin the wolf? In that case, it would be justified to ask whether this really is friendship, or if the wolf is merely a projection of a human being who is unhappy and unsatisfied with his own limitations.

A narcissist is someone who is unable to maintain a genuine friendship because he sees the other only as a means to affirm himself, to make himself feel better. The other is seen only insofar as it meets the expectations, ultimately it's all about himself. In the similar way humans can use animals to satisfy their own desires, ignoring the otherness of the animal. Although animals communicate with us, because of the asymmetry in our relationship with the animal, there is little that precludes when we project our own wishes and desires on animals and we ignore the inalienable otherness and the unbridgeable difference between them and us.

Still, a friendly relationship with an animal does not necessarily have to be narcissistic. Although it appears in Rowlands' description of his relationship to the wolf that Rowlands' focus in that relationship with the wolf is mainly on what it does to himself, the animal appears to him not merely as an object for self-affirmation. On the contrary. Rowlands' relationship with Brenin shows that respect for the individuality of the animal and a growing awareness of self in the relationship with that other being can go together.

The confrontation with the otherness of an animal can lead to a new self-awareness, but that's not the only thing that matters. Rowlands is aware that he cannot speak for the wolf, and that he cannot know for sure what the value of their relationship is for Brenin. Rowlands is, in other words, aware of the irreconcilable otherness of the wolf.

But in the very recognition of the irreconcilable difference it shows that a meaningful commitment between humans and animals can exist, and that we might label such a relation as friendship. But this combination of meaningful connection and recognition of difference is precarious in our asymmetric relationships with animals and requires a balancing act. And to the degree that animals are further removed from us, friendship between humans and animals will be more difficult. In that respect it is good to remember that Brenin was no wolf but a wolf-dog, a half-domesticated animal that lived with a man in a world controlled by humans. But what if the animal concerned is a truly wild animal?

3. Friendship with wild animals?

What can go wrong once we lose sight of the distance between us and wildlife is shown in the wonderful Werner Herzog documentary *Grizzly Man* (USA, 2005). *Grizzly Man* is about the young American Timothy Treadwell, who lived for thirteen summers in Alaska between wild bears and eventually was eaten by a bear. The film gives us a glimpse into the contemporary fascination with wildlife and the idea that friendship with wild bears is possible.

Initially Treadwell is very aware of the danger, but the longer he is able to gain the trust and respect of indigenous grizzlies, the more his quest for peaceful co-existence transforms into an attempt to make friends with the animals. Increasingly, he talks about the animals as if they were his friends, giving them nicknames, trying to touch them, becoming more and more infatuated with the animals. Where the viewer is initially impressed by Treadwell's courage, his ability to decipher bear behavior and his attempt to peacefully live together with them, as the movie progresses, his attitude toward the bears slowly but steadily becomes more troubling.

The documentary traces the gruesome death of the bear lover as an inevitable result of a tragic misunderstanding. We see how Treadwell's tormented soul is looking for a kind of friendship with bears that he cannot find with people; and that in his desire to become one with the bears, Treadwell slowly loses sight of the world in which the bears live, a world in which moral considerations and friendship play no role.

From his supposed friendship with bears Treadwell increasingly turns against people. The park managers warn against accustoming bears to humans, they prohibit feeding the bears and call people to stay at a distance. Bears without fear for people are dangerous and must be killed; people and bears should therefore keep distance from each other. According Treadwell, however, park warden and conservationists are merely interested in bears as a resource: he believes they want to shoot the bears; and sees himself as the only true friend of the bears, with a moral duty to protect them against evil mankind.

The film features Sven Haakanson, a native resident of Alaska and curator of the local museum. He criticizes Treadwell's attempt to become one with the bears and close friendship with

them. He explains that the indigenous inhabitants of Alaska realize that there is an unbridgeable gap between the worlds of humans and that of bears. That gap poses a limit that must be respected, not so much because of reasons of security, but mainly out of respect for ‘the bear and what the bear represents.’

Haakanson criticizes people like Treadwell because, although they pretend to bridge this gap, they are actually just projecting their own needs and desires onto the bears; they use bears to supplement their own sense of emptiness. Haakanson considers this as the ultimate form of disrespect and typical of the way modern city people interact with nature – if they want something they just take it. Above all, modern man wants to give in to his desire for pure untouched nature and in doing so kills that which he desires.

The problem, of course, does not just occur in our relation with wild bears, but with all the wild animals. Wild animals inhabit their own world, and when we pretend to be friends, we risk losing sight of the inalienable otherness of those animals. The otherness of wildlife goes along with their wildness and uncontrollability – it belongs to the essence of wild animals that they do not bother about our rules and considerations, but rather inhabit their own world. By pretending that we can befriend them, we are either fooling ourselves and we’re overlooking the fact that wild animals cannot be controlled, or we smuggle away that in our relationship with them we are mostly interested in ourselves and that we are actually using them for our own desires and impose our will onto their wildness.

4. The wolf in the Netherlands

How difficult it apparently is to not lose sight of the otherness and unruliness of wild animals in the admiration we feel for them, and in our attempt to live together with them in a peaceful way, is also evident from the debate which arose when on March 8, 2015 the Netherlands was visited by a wild wolf for the first time in over 150 years. It was a young animal, probably grew up on a German military training site, which was looking for a new habitat. The animal crossed the border near the town of Emmen and then walked many kilometers through the northern parts of the Netherlands, to eventually disappear back into Germany after four days. A year earlier, a dead wolf was found in the North East – but on closer inspection that animal turned out to be deposited there by people, presumably as a prank. But now, finally, there was a real report of an actual wolf.

The arrival of the animal caused a lot of commotion. For a long time, most Dutch people thought it impossible that a wild animal such as a wolf would ever return to Dutch soil. Many believed that the Netherlands is actually unsuitable for a wolf – and that any wolf arriving would inevitably cause all kinds of problems. Many saw their suspicions confirmed when the wolf – contrary to what was predicted by experts (a wild wolf would be timid, afraid of people, invisible) – seemingly at ease walked on the sidewalk of the small village of Kolham, where it was filmed by a surprised motorist.

The images went around the world; “Terrifying footage of wolf prowling city streets looking for its next meal,” the British newspaper *Mirror* headlined, with any sense of exaggeration.

Many felt that there had to be something weird going on with the animal. Someone on the internet said what many thought: ‘All fairy tales. This is not a wild wolf but an animal that has escaped from a private zoo. A real wolf would never walk the streets in between humans.’⁶ Even though wolves have been living in European cultural landscapes for many centuries, many people deep down still believe that a wolf belongs in the uninhabited wilderness.⁷

The distinction between culture and wilderness is reminiscent of the kind of distinctions that the British anthropologist Mary Douglas has analyzed in her influential classic *Purity and danger* (Douglas 1966). Douglas’ study shows how people create their own reality through a systematic ordering and classification of matter. Something appears unclean soon as it is in the wrong place, ‘dirt is matter out of place,’ says Douglas. The distinction between culture and wilderness also functions as such a symbolic distinction between clean and unclean. The unclean wilderness appears as a threat to the pure culture.

In the 1959 Russian novel *Life and Fate* by Vasily Grossman, this old European view is nicely phrased by main character Viktor Pavlovich:

‘Man never understands that the cities he has built are not an integral part of Nature. If he wants to defend his culture from wolves and snowstorms, if he wants to save it from being strangled by weeds, he must keep his broom, spade and rifle always at hand. If he goes to sleep, if he thinks about something else for a year or two, then everything’s lost. The wolves come out of the forest, the thistles spread and everything is buried under dust and snow. Just think how many great capitals have succumbed to dust, snow and couch-grass.’ (Grossman 2006.)

In other words, the thought that threatening, dangerous wolves belong to the wilderness, is not based on biological knowledge, but on a symbolic distinction between culture and what lies beyond. The arrival of the wolf to the Netherlands is perceived as a threat because the animal itself seems to ignore and undermine this boundary between culture and wild. Wolf haters fear the unruliness of the wolf

⁶ Wolves in the Netherlands Facebook page of 09/03/15, 16:20. Wolves in the Netherlands (*Wolven in Nederland*) is a coalition of conservation groups and other stakeholders, that seek to prepare the Dutch population for the arrival of wolves, by showing how the wolf could be an asset to the ecological health of the Dutch nature, and by providing information about wolf behavior and possible measures to prevent damage to and loss of livestock.

⁷ Strangely enough, you will also find that idea in other places in Europe with a lot more space, such as Scandinavia and France. In Norway we even see conspiracy theories about wolves that are secretly introduced by animal activists and the government in a conspiracy against the rural population. See Skogen et al. 2008.

that threatens to undermine our meaningful cultural world that was conquered on nature and therefore want to expel the animal to another world.⁸

Many people nevertheless feel that the wolf is an impressive charismatic animal that deserves admiration and respect and with which we should try to live together peacefully. But for people who want to welcome the wolf too it can be difficult to acknowledge the otherness of the animal. The wolf that roamed the Netherlands in March 2015 for four days was not so much bothered by people who wanted to expel or kill the animal, but mostly by those who wanted to see it with their own eyes. These people did not want to shoot the animal, but wanted to make pictures and share them on social media.⁹

The wolf is one of the most charismatic animals in Europe, it is seen as a beautiful, intelligent and social animal that deserves respect. Many people even feel a deep emotional bond with the animal. But no other animal is so fraught with all kinds of symbolic meanings; sometimes the animal itself almost becomes invisible under all symbolism. In many stories about wolves, wolves are depicted as innocent, pure, honest, and authentic. The wolf is a symbol of the power and wisdom of nature that modern society has lost sight of. It is in this context that many people talk about friendship with the wolf. ‘I prefer a wolf as a friend to a hunter,’ one can sometimes hear among animal lovers. ‘The wolf is not dangerous, people are’; ‘The wolf is at least honest...’; ‘It’s people, not the wolf, who behave like beasts.’¹⁰

Many of these wolf fans identify with the wolf, not primarily with the real animal with its typical characteristics and behavior, but notably with the wolf as a symbol of the pure, morally pure wilderness. As the innocent victim of a hostile human culture that is just out to subdue and destroy nature, wolves should be protected from the evil of humanity. The risk of such an approach that idealizes wolves is that it blinds people to potential conflicts that wild wolves could lead to if they move into a well-ordered, domesticated landscape such as the Netherlands. The romantic idea of a harmonious, equal and mutual friendship with wild wolves, it seems, ends up being illusory. It appears that the romantic wolf is ultimately not much more than a projection of our own desire for purity and of our discomfort with our modern self.

If we as a modern society want to learn to live together with wild animals which also show up in our immediate environment, in the place where our children play and we nurture our gardens, then we will have to learn to deal with the stubbornness that is inherent in wildlife. By denying that an animal is different and our relation to it will for that reason be complicated and difficult sometimes,

⁸ For that reason it will not reassure people when experts point to the statistically low probability that wolves pose a threat to humans and livestock.

⁹ The route of the wolf can be followed in detail on many websites. For example here:
<http://www.metronieuws.nl/binnenland/2015/03/volg-het-spoor-van-de-wolf>

¹⁰ See the Facebook page of Wolves in the Netherlands.

we tend to lose sight of what is required of us if we really want to live together peacefully with these wild animals.

5. A tense friendship

To the extent that a friendly relationship with wild animals is at all possible, the otherness and unruliness of animals therein will have to be given a place. In our relationship with animals, we need to find elegant and graceful ways to deal with each other and grant a place to the significant otherness of animals.¹¹ When it comes to our treatment of wild animals that may mean that we need to recognize that humans and animals are best served by maintaining a certain distance from one another.

When the Groningen wolf almost fell victim to the human fascination or even love for wild animals, some people argued that we should leave the animal alone, to keep distance out of a feeling of love.

‘Dear Wolf, quickly go back to a large deep forest somewhere across the border. There clearly is no future for you here: too many thrill seekers with their cameras and wild goose chase stories. I’ll miss you, but above all I want you to be safe and live in freedom. I ask all people who see you to leave you alone, to not make pictures or videos and to not chase you, but to respect you for what you are: a free soul, a Gypsy in transit.’¹²

This wolf lover recognizes the insurmountable asymmetry in our relationship with them, and aims to respect for the individuality and unruliness of the wild animal itself, even if this means keeping in check his desire for closeness and union with the animal and bridging the distance. Maybe this paradoxical combination of loving commitment and recognition of insurmountable otherness can be rightfully labeled as ‘friendship’ towards wildlife.

A friend of wildlife is aware of the problem that follows from the differences between humans and animals, and does not try to take away these differences, but rather to give them a place, even if that means that he has to keep distance to the animal for which he feels affection and admiration.

6. Close

Friendships between people and animals differ fundamentally from friendships between humans because of the asymmetry of the relationship between human and animal. But meaningful relationships of mutual goodwill between humans and animals do exist: as in the case in our relationship with companion animals and pets, where animals and humans enjoy each other’s company

¹¹ Donna Haraway speaks of ‘*significant otherness*’ (Haraway 2008, p. 15).

¹² ‘Leave our wolf alone’ Facebook page, entry from 03/09/2015 (accessed on 1 May 2015)

and benefit from the relationship, and can even communicate across species borders that they appreciate each other's company. These 'friendships' are based in a shared common atmosphere of interspecies communication. In those cases our warm feelings of goodwill for an animal may even be answered by that animal in a manner that is appropriate to that animal.

It may be difficult to develop such a friendly understanding with wild animals, because that relationship is asymmetrical in a much more fundamental way. And as an animal is wilder the problem gets bigger. We may cherish warm feelings of benevolence towards wildlife, admire wild animals for what they are, and admire how they are different from ourselves, but a wild animal is not really interested in us. It may be indifferent because it got used to us, or it may feel threatened and flee, or it can attempt to benefit from its relationship with us and therefore seek our company. For some, potentially dangerous animals like the wolf this is bound to lead to problems.

Because of this fundamental asymmetry in our relationship with wild animals, there is a greater risk that we expect more from our relationships with wild animals than these animals can deliver. In that case we end up mostly with ourselves and our own dreams and desires about harmonious coexistence with animals will get the better of us. Wild animals live in their own world, and any attempt to bridge the gap between their world and ours through friendship is not just based on an illusion, but all too easily turns into a disrespectful denial of individuality and wildness of the animal.

This does not mean, of course, that we could not have a relationship of benevolence towards wild animals, or that we should not seek a conflict poor way to live together with other animals. Such coexistence can mean that we are trying to give these animals the space they need, and give the animals themselves the opportunity to learn how to live with us. And that we recognize that sometimes it will be best to keep a distance - to stay at a distance ourselves or to keep the animals at a distance - even if we actually desire for intimate contact with an animal. 'Friendship' with wildlife precisely consists of the paradoxical combination of benevolent involvement and loving detachment.

For those who regard the wolf as friend and innocent victim of modern society, the possibility of human-wildlife conflicts in itself presents a challenge. Love for wolves cannot be easy; what is more, a too rosy picture of wolves fails to do justice to their very nature as predators. It is easy to love a beautiful and innocent animals, but sharing spaces with large carnivores will never be easy. Recognizing wolves as real animals living in the ecological and social context of our landscapes demands we acknowledge them as predators. As long as we live separate lives, we might try to ignore their presence, but once we share the same landscape, we can no longer do so. In that case, we will have to be prepared to enter into a negotiation process in which we both recognize the wolf's agency and accept that its interest can conflict with ours. From the perspective of wolf management, the resurgence of the wolf confronts us with our desire for control, not only control over nature, but also control over nature within us. We cannot but play an active role in organizing our relation with the wolf; we need to find an appropriate *habitus* that allows us to live together, and that will require some

degree of management and control. But respecting nature's autonomy also implies a willingness to live with wild creatures, not just when they are charismatic and cute, but also when they are a nuisance. Without practicing tolerance – the virtue of enduring those things that are difficult to endure – wildlife management will inevitably incarcerate wildness. We should challenge our profound but problematic fascination for the vitality of wild animals and remind ourselves that the threat to their unruly wildness does not only come from our urge for control, but also from our unbounded desire to become one with them.

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